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NEWS

Saudi Arabian king sets up council on Islamic affairs

New York Times

TUNIS, Tunisia - In a move to limit the influence of militant clerics, **King Fahd** of Saudi Arabia has set up a Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs directed by ranking relatives and technocrats.

The council will act as a sort of ombudsman of Islamic activity in educational, economic and foreign policy matters. Prince Sultan, defense minister and a brother of the king, is head of the council.

The king said the goal is to "deepen Saudi Arabia's service of Islam." But knowledgeable Saudis said there is little doubt that one purpose is to dilute the authority of the Ulemas Council, a highly conservative group of Muslim theologians.

The Ulemas Council has considerably widened its power with the government in recent years, seeking to push educational, social, legal and foreign policy in fundamentalist directions. The ulemas have opposed efforts to modernize the economy and have supported radical Islamists in other Arab countries.

Just before the United Nations population conference in Cairo in September, the Ulemas Council called the conference an insult to Islam and directed the Saudi government to boycott the meeting.

Among the royal family members named to the council Tuesday night are the powerful interior minister, **Prince Naif**, and the foreign minister, another brother of the king, Prince Saud Faisal. Another member is Mohammed Ali Aba Khayl, a technocrat who has served for three decades as finance and economy minister.

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